Introduction to Cultural Studies

Lecture 5: Visual Culture (1) – Painting

1) Realist Vision

2) A Matter of Perspective

3) Observing the World Realistically

4) How to Read an Image

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1) Realist Vision

[R]ealism is almost by definition highly visual, concerned with registering what the world looks like. We tend to believe – and centuries of philosophical tradition stand behind the belief – that sight is the most objective and impartial of our senses. Thus, any honest accounting for the real, in the sense of the appearances of the world, needs to call upon visual inspection and inventory. It needs to give a sense of the thereness of the physical world, as in still-life painting. In fact, realism as a critical and polemical term comes into culture, in the early 1850s, to characterize painting – that of Courbet in particular – and then by extension is taken to describe a literary style. It is a term resolutely attached to the visual, to those works that seek to inventory the immediately perceptible world. And then: to show that the immediate perceptible world and the systems it represents and implies constitute constraints on human agents attempting to act in the world, hard edges against which they rub up.

(Brooks 2005, 16f.)

If realism stood for an approach to the painting of the contemporary world that treated ordinary experience (rather than the doings of the rich and great) as the proper realm of art, then there were clearly abundant inherited materials from which such art could be made. The emergence and growing importance of the independent genres of portrait, landscape, still-life, and genre-painting itself (small scenes from everyday life), in both northern and southern Europe, between the fifteenth and the eighteenth centuries, was one sign of the fact that painting, like the other arts, increasingly served secular functions.

(Hemingway 2010, 123f.)

[Gustave Courbet (1819-1877): Self-Portraits]
(1843-45) (1845/46) (1848/49) (1872/73)

["The Stonebreakers", 1849, Dresden (lost 1945)]

["Sea", 1873]

["The Origin of the World", 1866]

2) A Matter of Perspective

'Light': a traditional Western metaphor for divine truth which can be objectively measured by means of the applied mathematics of Euclidian geometry, which in turn provides the framework for the ideal of ontologically correct vision

↕

'Perspective': a (early) modern invention which marks "a singular moment when the fine arts made an actual contribution to the history of science" (*Encyclopedia of Aesthetics* 1998)
⇨ putting the observer on the map: object ← → subject
↕
medium / representation

(cf. Guillén 1971, Reinfandt 2000)

The methods of projecting three-dimensional space onto a flat surface are established by convention; the use of color, the abstracting, the simplification of the object depicted, and the choice of reproducible features are all based on convention. It is necessary to learn the language of painting in order to 'see' a picture, just as it is impossible to understand what is spoken without knowing the language.

(Jakobson 1978, 39)

⇨ 'objectivity' has to be reconceptualized immanently
⇨ materialism /empiricism vs. rationalism / idealism ?
⇨ the emergence of a specifically modern, immanently transcendent observer position

[Camera obscura: Athanasius Kircher, *Ars magna lucis et umbrae*, 1646]

camera obscura

ancestor of the photographic camera. The Latin name means "dark chamber," and the earliest versions, dating to antiquity, consisted of small darkened rooms with light admitted through a single tiny hole. The result was that an inverted image of the outside scene was cast on the opposite wall, which was usually whitened. For centuries the technique was used for viewing eclipses of the Sun without endangering the eyes and, by the 16th century, as an aid to drawing; the subject was posed outside and the image reflected on a piece of drawing paper for the artist to trace. Portable versions were built, followed by smaller and even pocket models; the interior of the box was painted black and the image reflected by an angled mirror so that it could be viewed right side up. The introduction of a light-sensitive plate by J.-N. Niepce created photography.

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Linear perspective gives the observer the illusion [that] he could see without being involved, that he could see without being seen, without changing the observed through observing and without himself being changed by the act of observing: the subject that sees by means of linear perspective installs itself behind the window of a 'peep-show' [...], in the position of a secret voyeur invisible to himself an others. Consequently he is an empirical subject only in a very limited sense. While he is *in* the world in the emphatic sense that the things of the world organize themselves according to his perspective (the things in the world appear before and for his gaze, he is at the same time distanced from the world by this very act.

(Lüdemann 1999, 66, Engl. transl. Huck 2010, 90)

Cf. Jay 1988 on "Scopic Regimes and Modernity" and
   Crary 1991 on *Vision and Modernity.*

18th-Century Observer Positions:

immersion (being)   ← →   distance (representation)
participation   ← →   observation
touch, smell, hear   ← →   visuality
entertainment   ← →   knowledge
spectacle   ← →   authority, legitimacy, normativity
popular culture   ← →   Culture (religion, science)
Subjectivity   ← →   Objectivity
                        ↓
                       art
                    literature

Ned Ward,   Daniel Defoe, various non-fictional
The London Spy (1709) ← →   works (1724-38)
          prints by Hogarth
          The Spectator
          authorial narrators

(cf. Huck 2010, 31-77)

[Wenceslaus Hollar, "The Royall Exchange of London", 1688.]

Eighteenth-Century Dichotomies (Ideology):

feminity   ← →   **masculinity**
indulgent   ← →   sober
irrational   ← →   rational
private   ← →   public
familial   ← →   commercial
artificial   ← →   real
Colour, ornament   ← →   simple, undecorated dress
consumption   ← →   restraint
    ↓   ↓
Object   ← →   **Subject**
↕   ↕
'Subjectivity'   ← →   **'Objectivity'**

(Huck 2010, 119-132)

3) Observing the World Realistically

Even for those who try to be methodologically alert, it still may come as a sort of epistemic shock to realize how recent is the broad common assumption of historical time as a 'natural' condition – a common medium stretching to infinity 'in' which individuals exist and events take place. It is an epistemic shock to realize that this historical convention is not only completely absent in ancient Greece or medieval Europe, it is by no means commonly held even in 1800. The construction of historical time in nineteenth-century Realist narrative corresponds precisely to that construction of space in realist paining achieved several centuries earlier. In both cases, the apparent focus on realist objects and subjects has distracted attention from the fact that what such art represents are the media of modernity, neutral time and neutral space.

(Ermarth 1997, 70)

['The narrator'] is really a sort of administrative function in narrative. The term narrator suggests, comfortably but falsely, that the narrative hindsight can be referred to an individual, and it thus seems to call attention to and validates the individual perspective. In fact such a reading of the narrative function in question trivializes it, and masks the existence of a perspective *system,* with its manifold abstract powers. Identifying the system by its specifying function alone ('the narrator'), obscures the system's most powerful function, which is to render time neutral, homogeneous and infinite. This time [...] is the medium of modernity.

(Ermarth 1997, 76)

[Gustave Courbet, "The Burial at Ornans", 1849/50]
>"A Burial Teeming with Life" (Tuchman 2008)

It's the colors of [the villagers] outerwear and the headgear that animate the painting. On the left, there's lots of black with bands of white. The next sequence is predominantly white. Near the center of the canvas, red enlivens the funeral pallor. Then there's a mess of black. An old-timer dressed in a colored long coat, britches, and blue-green hose, as well as a graceful white dog near him, emerge from another block of black. Lastly, the white bonnets and handkerchiefs of some women create a distinctive rhythm. It's a canvas teeming with life. [...]
As an author in the catalogue of the retrospective notes, "By placing the yawning hole where the body will be buried in the foreground at the center of the composition, Courbet emphasizes his break with the rules of history painting that decree the lines of the composition must converge on the hero." Just as significantly, if the Burial were hung high enough off the floor, it would be possible for onlookers to imagine themselves occupying that hole and witnessing the scene gathered beside it.
Like many young painters both before and after him who have executed ambitious works such as *A Burial at Ornans*, Courbet anticipated replacing the style he inherited with the one he was introducing. About the Realist painting he populated with his hometown villagers, the artist declared, "It is the burial of Romanticism."

(Tuchman 2008)

[Adolph Menzel, "The Iron Rolling Mill" (1872-75)]

[I]n Menzel's painting the effluvia of industry, the frenzied actions of the workers, and the burning mass of iron threaten to overpower the layout of receding orthogonals, suggesting powers beyond those that industrial rationality can contain. Moreover, the transformation of nature through labor is tellingly counter-posed with the reproduction of life in processes of washing (left) and eating (right), in a way that graphically suggests what is embodied and used up in industry's products. The scene is framed by two figures – the man pulling the ingot to the left and the woman bending to the right – both of whom seem about to enter our space, and who confront us with an unflinching eye and rudely announce their class difference. It is hard not to see the knife clutched in the fist of the man seated next to the woman as intimidating a potential threat. The pincers that form the lighted motif at the center of the composition are graphic symbols of the struggle to control natural forces, but their parting claws also suggest the breaking of chains.

(Hemingway 2010, 130)

4) How to Read an Image

Checklist of common-sense questions:

- What is it?
- What is around it?
- Who made it?
- When was it made?
- For whom was it made?
- Who or what is depicted?
  (person/place/object/event/concept)
- What do you think its intended message might be?
- What does the image tell you?

(Cameron 2003)

It seems unlikely, then, that any new technology is going to render images, or sensuous firstnesses, resemblances, or analog codes, obsolete. The persistence of these qualities is what ensures that, no matter how caculable of measurable images become, they will maintain the uncanny, ambiguous character that has from the first made them objects of fascination and anxietey. We will never be done with asking what images mean, what effects they have on us, and what they want from us.

(Mitchell 2010, 47)

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